

Liebenberg, Ian, Jorge Risquet and Vladimir Shubin (eds), *A Far-away War: Angola, 1975-1989*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press 2015, 207 pp.

This publication, which consists of an Introduction and eight chapters by different authors, appeared at the time of the 40th anniversary of the entry of South Africa into the Angolan war. It is short but packed with useful information and well-documented with photos, geographical and combat maps, an extensive bibliography of 35 pages, political cartoons and posters, historical surveys and statistics. Edited by the South African Ian Liebenberg (Director of the Centre for Military Studies at the Military Academy in Stellenbosch), the Cuban Jorge Risquet (who participated in the 1988 Angolan peace talks), and the Russian Vladimir Shubin (former Deputy Director of the Institute for African Studies at the Russian Academy of Science), *A Far-Away War* sheds new light on this prolonged conflict, focusing on the involvement of South-Africa, Cuba, Russia and East-Germany. In doing so, it opens new perspectives and widens the understanding of the struggle for liberation in Southern Africa, not only for the average history and politics reader but also, as a very useful reference book, for the more advanced researcher and academic.

The editors make it clear from the outset that, although breaking new ground, this book is not a definitive work but rather a presentation of new insights and new voices, hopefully leading towards further research and more dialogue, admitting that there are still many aspects of this war to be debated. They consider their publication as a necessary complement to counter the South African perspective that is pre-dominant in earlier publications on the Angolan war. Even though they call it a search for truth, *A Far-Away War* is nevertheless also written from a certain perspective. It documents the Cuban, Russian and East-German point of view, at times with a certain naiveté, is not very inquisitive about the motives of the ex-Soviet bloc in Africa and is certainly anti-Western. However, this 'other side' might be inevitable if one wants to have a better understanding of this turbulent period in Southern African history.

In a very detailed introduction, Ian Liebenberg gives a short survey of South Africa's involvement as a major actor in the Border War as the Angolan war was called, blinded by ideology and having misread the reality of liberation struggles. He focuses on the history of this involvement, the different issues at stake, the phases in the conflict, the actors and more.

Ian Liebenberg is also the author of Chapter One ('On our Borders'), in which he places the Angolan War against the background of Namibia's

struggle for independence, pointing at the interrelationship between the two conflicts because of South Africa's concern to protect its position in Namibia and stop the spreading of communism. He gives a good chronological survey of events and an interesting historical background since the colonial days. Going into the legal and political debacle around the League of Nations mandate, he describes the different actors and elaborates on crucial issues, concluding that this war in Namibia could have been prevented as early as 1946 when the United Nations took over the mandate from the League of Nations.

In Chapter Two ('Tempest in a Teacup'), which also is contextual, Phil Eidelberg, Professor emeritus in history from the University of South Africa, places the Angolan war against the background of the Cold War, the increase in Soviet military support in the Third World, the weakening of the USSR by 1975 when the Angolan war started, the Soviet setbacks in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the rivalry with China, Soviet interventions in the Horn of Africa etc. He maintains that the USSR was to gain little from the Angolan war, especially since oil-rich Angola continued to have good trade relations with the West, and that involvement in Africa only weakened the Soviet bloc's economic potential further. Eidelberg, insinuates that, in a Cold War context, this war was for several reasons unnecessary.

Two chapters, namely Three and Eight, are complementary and must be read together. Chapter Three, also by Ian Liebenberg, describes the growing militarisation of South African society between 1972 and 1988, the internal and external projection of military force, a military buildup to face the Cold War internationally and an effort to suppress unrest and protest internally, the *Rooi Gevaar* (Red Threat) and the *Swart Gevaar* (Black Threat). This chapter elaborates on military imports, the South African military industry and on the nuclear option, connecting it all with South Africa's entry into the Angolan war in 1975/1976. Chapter Eight by Liebenberg, journalist Gert van der Westhuizen and publisher Tinie du Plessis, describes conscription and the national military service in South Africa as well as the growing resistance of conscripts against deployment in the Angolan war coming from an ideologically laden society, geographically and politically isolated and obsessed with the idea of a 'Total Onslaught'. The authors go deeper into the motifs of the conscripts for resistance, their options to escape deployment, their place in society etc. They describe well how South Africa's position was weakened from inside the country or as Liebenberg observed in the introduction, namely that "you cannot hold on to or dominate territory that does not belong to you".

Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven deal specifically with the Cuban,

Soviet and East-German involvement in the Angolan war. Chapters Five and Six concern the Soviet Union. Chapter Five, by Liebenberg, traces the relations between South Africa and Russia/the Soviet Union all through history from the 18th century on, explaining how Cold War myopia and the obsession with the 'Total Onslaught' caused so much misery in Southern Africa. Although this chapter is at times very detailed in facts and figures, it, surprisingly, does not go into the role played by Communists in South Africa's liberation struggle nor does it elaborate on the important role of the Soviet Union in the training of ANC cadres. Chapter Six by Vladimir and Gennady Shubin gives an historic overview of the Soviet involvement in Angola and the gradual build-up of support, starting even before independence. Chapter Four follows a similar pattern giving an historic overview of Cuba's involvement, its contributions in advisors, hardware and troops. It also gives an indication of the role of other actors on the ground, in particular the USA, Zaire (now the DRC) and China, at that time a rival of the Soviet Union. It gives a good understanding of the different phases in the Angolan war, the connections with the USSR and the engagement with the South Africans. In Chapter Seven, finally, Klaus Storkmann from the Centre for Military History and Social Science in Potsdam and Ulrich van der Heyden from the University of South Africa cover the East-German involvement, the different ways and means of support, its solidarity with African liberation movements, its economic setbacks etc.

These four chapters which constitute the body of the publication, could have gone deeper into the different policy issues, explain better the reasons for involvement and place the role of those countries within a broader international context. These contributions, however, remain largely limited to facts, figures and a chronological order of events. They also could have benefited from better synchronisation, avoiding unnecessary repetitions of the history of the conflict and going deeper into the essence of each involvement. *A Far-Away War* remains, however, an important addition to the literature on Southern African liberation from colonialism, a rich source of information and historic survey, analysing some issues extremely well, a good read of history and a useful reference book for the researcher.

Jan F Mutton
Department of Political Sciences
University of Pretoria
